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A MONTHLY LETTER ABOUT EVANGELISM

LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

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The following letter was received from a Roman Catholic friend working in Belgium.

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I am now able to give a favourable answer to your request and hope you will not mind the delay.

The subject is the missionary activity of a Catholic group among the industrial and mining workers of the Sambre valley. I thus let one of my brothers speak. Theories and explanations as to "why" and "how" are unnecessary. Here are the facts:

For a Long time, since 1950, several of us had worried about the urgency of announcing the Good News to all.

Some timid attempts were made at Christmas 1951 and again in 1952. Four of us spent the evening touring cafés. We sang some old Christmas carols, we played a few tunes, we spoke a few Christian words. We left leaflets in the hands of the customers seated at the tables.

We were very surprised by the reception we had everywhere, which showed that, contrary to what we feared, we had not met with complete indifference. Nevertheless our awkwardness was obvious; our singing poor; our words not eloquent. We wanted to do better, but we had to work with the means available. And God blessed those means. What else did we need?

We again gave out leaflets at Christmas 1954 and 1955, 15,000 copies each time. Some were handed out as before, others were distributed by our friends, or left in mail boxes, or given out at the exit of cinemas or at the station. Matters, however, remained dormant for a while.

But one evening during Advent of 1955, as a group of us were praying on the theme of Isaiah, 40:9-11: "Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings...", we felt that things began to come clear. We decided to realize, starting on the following Sunday, a project which had taken too long to ripen: to preach on the street, to everybody, to many passers-by. Some do it to sell perishable goods, why should we be afraid

REFERAT FÜR EVANGELISATION · STUDIENABTEILUNG · OEKUMENISCHER RAT DER KIRCHEN

DEPARTMENT ON EVANGELISM · DIVISION OF STUDIES · WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

DÉPARTEMENT D'ÉVANGÉLISATION · DIVISION DES ÉTUDES · CONSEIL ŒCUMÉNIQUE DES ÉGLISES

of announcing the words which give eternal life? "Woe to me if I do not announce the Good News - to announce Christ is a pressing necessity."

Thus, strong in those two convictions that the Gospel is made for all - and that the word of God is all-powerful, we stood on the street corner. It was the Sunday before Christmas. A small team, as you will see. We were quite shy, but we had to go through with it, since we had come for that. One of us climbed on a soap-box. The passers-by, surprised, stopped, and went on again; others listened at a distance, a few courageous ones drew nearer. The vegetable-farmers, out of curiosity, also looked on, but from a distance. The show, unusual as it was, was nevertheless not sensational. Some Christmas carols came reluctantly out of our portable harmonium. One friend handed out tracts to the passers-by. The music stopped and the preaching started: "It will soon be Christmas, not only in the shop windows, and in the living rooms with their luxuriously trimmed Christmas trees, not only in the three-day weekends to Paris and the Christmas eve dances, but most of all in the hearts."

The same thing took place four or five times during the morning. This is all so long ago that one forgets the details - we did not take notes - but what we can't forget is the indescribable joy which filled us, about noon, when we put away our material. It was the joy of having been the instrument of Christ, while speaking about Him to those anonymous passers-by who would walk on, or who would stand with their hands in their pockets, their coat collars up. It was the joy of knowing that the public we reached was precisely the one we wanted to reach: the small people who stroll every Sunday on the market place, look around, touch the goods, sometimes buy... most of them working people - Belgians and foreigners - not in a hurry, inquisitive and congenial. These were the people who rarely go to church, and who were getting ready to celebrate Christmas in the same way as they would any ordinary village fair.

We faithfully kept our Sunday appointment from 11 to half past 12. There was a very small group around us, only some interested people who happened to pass there. This first group gave way to new members, a few at a time, who remained or left, each according to his grace and perseverance.

Very soon it became obvious that a solid link should be established between them, formed by the Lord Jesus Himself, sought in prayer and preferred to the world, in penitence. These lay apostles, men and women, needed a deepening of their Christian learning and, most of all, of their missionary vocations as witnesses of the Gospel. They needed common prayer, friendship, joy and much sincerity. We agreed unanimously on having weekly meetings.

Preaching is in itself a task full of difficulties. In short, one must catch the attention right away, with <u>valid</u> words which will find an echo in the hearts of the passers-by, by making allusions to problems which are <u>their</u> problems, with all the risks which this involves. Indeed, there is always a risk of going from one extreme to the other, from angelic preaching to demagogy. We try, however, to preach a message which indeed comes from heaven, but is addressed to the world. Only the Holy Spirit is capable of bridging that gap.

Announcing the love which God has for the world, must be done in words that are understandable to these unknown people who come by, so that they will find in them an answer, a hope in the middle of their miseries: marital

difficulties, the coming of old age, monthly payments to be met, the bitterness and loneliness of the immigrant, the fear of the working man or of the retired person at the beginning of winter, not forgetting that the general interest goes in turn from mining catastrophies to unemployment, football and the elections. We must not reach them in spite of all that, but through all that. Does it not form their lives?

You might say, "Very well, preach as much and as well as you want, but what will be the result of it?"

We frankly don't know, but we are full of hope. The experience of Christmas 1955 is but a pale beginning; the greatest task is ahead. Diverse experiments, more or less successful, are being tested, such as door to door distribution of tracts and gospels; contacts made through visits and correspondence; posters displayed in the windows of friendly and Christian families, showing large drawings of biblical scenes which will draw the interest of the passer-by.

Meanwhile, the small existing community, a dozen people of all ages and conditions, is doing its best to prepare a Christian advent, if it is at all to take place. Perhaps we shall never see any of it, if God does not mean for us anything but the sowing to the wind...

This little community is peculiar in one thing: the regular, conforming, traditional, blameless Christians have just about deserted it. Those who have remained are people who, if not quite ex-convicts, have nevertheless learned enough from life to be "converts", "comers-back" either from lukewarmness, or from indifference, or from unbelief, or, why not, from a life of sin. We see there a great advantage: we have gone beyond the stage of functional religion to a message of salvation. This is of foremost interest. This situation transforms the atmosphere. Respect and mutual confidence do not rest on "respectability" but on the fact that we adhere to Jesus Christ. The newcomer is not asked for his titles, not even for his last name, but he is simply, implicitly asked this question: "Are you coming with us?" This sometimes brings disappointments... But who can make an omelet without breaking the eggs?

At the present time not everything is rosy. Week after week, joys and worries intertwine. Regularly the temptation comes to give up in face of the apparent indifference of a great many passers-by, and the small number of witnesses, in face of the criticisms, the desertions and the skimpy results.

Besides that, however, there are abundant reasons to rejoice and hope. For three years now, thanks to God, His call has been sounded each Sunday to His estranged children. A living witness is given on the street by laymen and priests, and it does strike the passer-by. I can't write here about the innumerable words of sympathy I have overheard, the conversations, the questions asked, the letters received, the ingenuous acts of kindness which all took place on the corner of the flower market where we chose to settle down.

Some 25,000 leaflets bearing a text from the Gospel followed by a call to faith and conversion and by an address, were distributed. Thousands of Gospels, in French, Flemish, Italian, were given out freely to those listeners who expressed the desire to have one. We have never asked for anything from anyone anywhere. Gifts from members and an anonymous benefactor - may God bless him abundantly - have made this work possible until now.

And we should mention our friends in the team who, through rain and wind, joyously perform their witness, there, on the corner of the market, every Sunday morning!

Obviously the Lord is with us; he chose us to be His witnesses. And what is asked from witnessing servants, if not that they be faithful to the call?

Is that preaching on the market, this missionary activity the solution to the problem of ignorance and disappearance of faith? Ours is simply one of the many efforts of the Church to demolish this "wall" of which the apostle Paul speaks, which separates us from those who are outside the fold. Coming events will tell, and so will the Lord who called us.

Will you pray for us?